

Council sets debt limits for construction budget

The County Council opened the budget season Tuesday by adopting a set of spending limits for the six-year capital budget that begins July 1.

The procedural vote on Spending Affordability Guidelines set the

Council Notes

BY JANEL DAVIS

limit on bond amounts — money the county borrows to pay for construction projects — at \$1.458 billion over the next six years.

Councilman Howard A. Denis (R-Dist. 1) of Chevy Chase sponsored the plan, which sets the bond limit for the next two years at \$264 million each year. His plan — approved 5-3 — was an amendment to the one proposed by the council's Management and Fiscal Policy Committee, which had set the limit at \$245 million for each of the six years.

"I favor the law of holes: When you're in one, stop digging," Denis said about construction projects that have already been delayed because of funding problems.

He argued that the county can afford the additional debt and retain its AAA bond rating, which allows it to borrow money at lower rates.

"I think we should start to address this now, especially in school construction," Denis said.

Councilwoman Marilyn J. Praisner (D-Dist. 4) of Calverton, who voted against Denis' plan, said his numbers did not reflect the council's past behavior. She distributed a worksheet detailing how the council had spent more for construction projects than its original plans since the mid-1990s.

"The problem is that reality will catch up with us," she said. "... To build the six-year budget on a house of cards is not a good idea."

Councilmen Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg and Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown also voted against the higher bond limits.

The council is required by county code to set the guidelines each February. It may exceed the guidelines with at least seven votes.

Consumer protection office opened

Also Tuesday, County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) joined

Councilman Thomas E. Perez (D-Dist. 5) of Takoma Park in officially opening the county's Consumer Protection Office and announcing the hiring of a bilingual investigator to assist Spanish-speaking residents.

The announcement was held in conjunction with National Consumer Protection Week and highlighted a new core of 13 Spanish-speaking volunteers. Duncan also reinforced the county's support of five consumer legislation bills before the state legislature.

"Local government becomes the first and sometimes only line of defense in consumer protection," said Perez, who said that the Bush and Ehrlich administrations have been negligent in helping consumers. "We say zero tolerance to those who will prey on consumers."

Investigator Lorena Bailey joins the consumer protection staff to work with the county's Latino population. She comes to the county after five years with the Legal Aid Bureau in Baltimore.

The Consumer Protection Office can be reached at 240-777-3636.

In other actions

•**Park and Planning:** The council unanimously approved a \$902,000 appropriation to the Planning Board for its Development Review Division. The money will pay for a new technical support team and increase the division's employees from 30 to 38.

The council is also seeking applications for the Planning Board chairman. The incumbent's term expires in June, and he plans to reapply for the job.

Send letters of interest to Council President George L. Leventhal, 100 Maryland Ave., Rockville MD 20850. Deadline is April 12. Interviews will be held in June or July.

•**Nonprofit incubator program:** The program, which will provide technical assistance to the county's nonprofit grant recipients and mentor them through the application process for council grants, was approved 8-0.

•**Parking fines:** In an 8-0 vote, the council approved limiting fines for illegally parking in a fire lane or handicapped space to \$250. The law had previously listed \$250 as a minimum fine.

•**Tonight at 7:** A public hearing on the capital budget for Montgomery County Public Schools in the third-floor floor of the Council Office Building at 100 Maryland Ave. in Rockville.



Denis